

Making It Up As We Go

Luke 1:57-66

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This morning we continue with our sermon series, *Spirituality for Busy People*. We've been talking about spirituality and the things we can do to draw near to God and to the part of ourselves that longs for connection with God and with other people.

*The spiritual practices we have explored so far are: reading sacred texts, including, but not limited to the Bible, and practices that engage the mind, body, and spirit, like yoga and also the hokey pokey. This week, we turn to rituals. If your brain is anything like Google, the word *ritual*, brings up Ouija boards, or maybe images of altar servers burning incense. But rituals are everywhere, embedded in all faith traditions and in every part of our lives. Rituals are things we do to make meaning of life and to mark the important parts of our lives.

*School will start soon. What are, or were, your back to school rituals?

Rituals are everywhere. We have morning rituals that for some of us have to include coffee. And, that bowl of ice cream you have to have before bed, that's a ritual. Holidays are full of rituals...hanging stockings on the mantel at Christmas, egg hunts on Easter, corned beef and cabbage on St. Patrick's Day, and flowers and chocolate on Valentine's Day. This, doing the same thing year after year and, in some cases, day after day, marks the passage of time and brings meaning to the seasons of life, even when, to us, life seems pretty ordinary.

And of course, every faith tradition has rituals. Our text today begins with the story of John the Baptist's birth and highlights the Jewish rituals of circumcision and naming. A little background-Zechariah, who was a priest, and Elizabeth were John's parents. The author of Luke describes both of them as "righteous before God." One thing to note, they were pretty old and had no children. We've talked before about the cultural norms of the time, that made it shameful for a woman not to have children. Probably, not a day went by that Elizabeth didn't think about how her life would have been different if she had only had a child. One day, Zechariah was tending to his priestly duties and was visited by an angel who told him Elizabeth would give birth to a son and they would name him John. The angel went on to announce "...he will be great in the sight of the Lord...even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God." To which, Zechariah said, "What? We're old!" And because he didn't immediately embrace the angel's announcement, he was rendered mute. Our story picks up in Luke 1:57-66:

*Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed.

⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Think about the most awkward family gathering you can imagine and you may have some idea about how this went for the people gathered on this important day for the circumcision and naming of this long-awaited child. Circumcision, for the people of Israel, was done as a physical reminder and symbol of God's covenant with Israel, "You will be my people and I will be your God."

But, it was the naming part of this ritual where things got awkward. You see, the naming of a Jewish child is a profoundly spiritual moment. In the Jewish tradition, it is said that naming a baby is a statement of his or her character, specialness, and path in life. "For at the beginning of life we are given a name, and at the end of life a "good name" is all we take with us". Think about the people in the Bible who have had encounters with God, and then were given a different name. Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah when God entered into a covenant with Abram, promising he would be "the ancestor of a multitude of nations." And how will the people remember this covenant with God?

Circumcision.

And then in the New Testament, Saul's name was changed to Paul, following a moment of clarity and conversion along the road. What I am trying to say is the ancient Jewish world was not a world in which someone named their child "Moon Unit." Here is what one rabbi wrote, "Names came before the existence of those things with which they would subsequently be identified. Names are not the offspring, but rather the parents of everything in the universe. Things really are what they are called. Or to put it more bluntly, they are what they are because of what they are named..."

No wonder the people who heard about what happened on this day asked, "What then will this child become?" Originally doubting the truth of the angel's message, Zechariah comes full circle in the story, obediently naming his son John-**his child would be exactly who God said he would be.**

We have some rituals of our own, right? Every Sunday, someone, usually, a young person, brings in the Light, symbolizing God's presence among us. At prayer time, some of us light candles as we pray for people we love or situations in the world. Those lit candles add more light to a world that seems dark at times. In the process of lighting candles, we are reminded that lighting more candles takes nothing away from the original flame, it generates even more light. Communion, baptism, weddings, funerals, and baby dedications are all rituals that remind us of God's presence, mark time, and help us make meaning of our lives. Right there, in the middle of our lives, rituals show up and remind us that God is near and we are loved.

In their book *Spirituality for a Busy Generation*, Teri Peterson and Amy Fetterman discuss the importance of rituals and invite us to consider new rituals for a new time. They point out that many of the rituals that are part of our faith tradition, such as baby dedications, weddings, and even home blessings, while meaningful and important, are not particularly relevant, especially in the world of many young adults. Getting married, buying a house, and having children are less and less the norm for people in their 20's or even 30's. Instead, they spend more time in school, accumulate more debt, work long hours to pay off said debt, often delaying marriage, and finding themselves unable to afford to buy a house or have children.

And I would add, at the other end of adulthood, there are people who have already raised their children, but are welcoming grandchildren into their families, who no longer go to work every day, but give countless hours to volunteer work in their communities, and are selling their family homes and moving into retirement villages. Many of our rituals don't seem to reflect their lives either. Peterson and Fetterman ask, "How do we make sense of these experiences, at all ages and stages of life? How do we organize our hopes, dreams, fears, realities,

loves, losses, and find a sense of the Holy in the midst of them? Their answer to these questions is, "...we'll have to make it up as we go."

The more of life I experience, the longer I am in ministry, walking with you through joys and struggles, the more convinced I am that there is a need for some new rituals. It would be life-giving, I think, for there to be ways to pay more attention to what's going on in our lives. Rituals remind us that God is near. They draw us close together. They comfort us and they mark a point in time as significant. Some rituals help us move on, others force us to slow down and be still. Rituals give us the ability to celebrate and to grieve. I think they keep us involved in each other's lives. Let's face it, there are times when words are just not enough. We need to light a candle, get out the sprinkles, or share a piece of cake or a secret handshake.

In their book, Peterson and Fetterman describe a number of rituals they have "made up as they go along." One they have named, "Putting the Past in the Past," is one of my favorites. The ritual came about because one of the authors had experienced a really bad year and she felt she needed to do something to mark the end of that year and put it behind her. Here's how "Putting the Past in the Past" goes.

*First, friends gather together and they build a big fire in the firepit. Then, they write down everything they can remember from the past year that didn't go well---every irritating person, every bit of bad news, drama, horrible work assignments, every unfulfilled hope, every nightmare that came true, and every failure. When the lists are finally complete (and sometimes it takes a while), the friends talk about them, giving voice to the "badness" one last time. And then, they put the paper in the fire and watch it burn. When all the paper has disappeared, they roast marshmallows to remind themselves that "something sweet can come out of the bitterness of the past, if we just let go and move forward."

These friends “made it up as they went along” and now they do this ritual together at the beginning of every year. Watch for this ritual at DCC this January!

I’ve been thinking about occasions that I think need a ritual:

Saying good-bye to a family home

Coming out to your parents

Welcoming a new grandchild or pet

Marking something off of your bucket list

Taking that next important step to fulfill whatever dream you are chasing

There are so many moments when reminding ourselves that God is near and we are in this together would carry comfort or add to joy.

I wonder what kind of ritual *you* could use right now, what do you need to claim or celebrate or put behind you? As part of this sermon series, we have been gathering at 7pm on Wednesday nights to try out some new spiritual practices.

*This week, we will meet here for a candle-lighting ritual, shining light on the dark places and things in our world. Together, we will literally make the world a brighter place. You are invited. I promise we will end no later than 8pm. This ritual can be done with other people or alone, so if you are looking for something new to try at home, this might be just the thing. And let’s face it, the world needs more light. Rituals remind us that, in all places, in all situations, no matter what, we belong to God. You are loved. You are enough. You are a child of God.

Amen.